

News from the Wyoming Department of Health

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Don't Overlook Need for Flu Vaccination

Following an unusually severe 2014-15 influenza season, Wyoming Department of Health (WDH) officials want residents to prepare for the upcoming flu season with annual influenza vaccinations.

“While influenza is something we see every year, it should never be overlooked or just accepted as no big deal. Flu can often be a very serious illness and, sometimes, deadly, as we saw last year,” said Dr. Wendy Braund, state health officer and WDH Public Health Division senior administrator.

Reggie McClinton, a WDH epidemiologist, said there can be no question the 2014-15 influenza season was severe. “Sadly, we saw 29 influenza-associated deaths reported in Wyoming. This represents the highest number our state has seen in many, many years. We also had a high number of reported cases overall compared to usual.”

McClinton noted the median age for residents who died was 75 with 21 of the reported deaths occurring in people older than 65; one death reported in a child; and others among adults under 65.

Braund said almost everyone six months or older should get a seasonal flu vaccine each year. “Getting a flu vaccine is safe and is the most important action people can take to help prevent getting ill with influenza and avoid passing it on to others,” she said.

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“Predicting which flu strains will be most common in a given year is complicated and sometimes strains can ‘mutate’ or change. Last season’s vaccine was not as effective as we would have liked,” Braund said. “Vaccination remains a useful prevention strategy and at this point there is no reason to expect a problem with this season’s vaccines. Wyoming residents should not use the troubles with last season’s vaccine as an excuse to avoid this season’s vaccination.”

It takes about two weeks for flu vaccines to offer protection. “We don’t want people to wait until folks around them are ill,” Braund said. “We’ve already seen the beginning of early activity.”

Influenza is a contagious respiratory illness caused by a virus. Symptoms include fever, headache, extreme tiredness, dry cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose and muscle aches.

Braund said, “Anyone can get the flu. Healthy folks can recover. But they can also spread the virus to others who are more vulnerable to flu and its effects such as older residents, young children and those with certain medical conditions. That’s why the vaccine is recommended for just about everyone.”

Influenza vaccines are available in many locations, including local public health offices, workplaces, doctors’ offices and retail stores. “Flu vaccines are not expensive and most insurance policies cover the costs,” Braund said.

In Wyoming, the cost of the vaccine itself is covered for many children by federal funding and the vaccine program for those eligible is managed by WDH. Children who qualify include those covered by Medicaid, uninsured children, American Indian or Alaska native children and some children considered to be underinsured.

Basic common-sense measures can also slow the spread of influenza and other respiratory diseases. These steps include covering your mouth and nose with your sleeve or a tissue when you sneeze and cough; frequently washing your hands; and staying home from work, school, day care and errands when ill.

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